MULTIMODAL TEACHING: RESHAPING LINEAR TEXTS AS DIGITAL STORIES IN THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

Irina Ioana SPĂTARU*

Abstract: *As the new generations of digital natives and the development of the new technologies ask for radical changes in cultural and teaching practices all over the world, it is becoming clear that scholars and educators should adapt to the demand for digital literacies and the use of multimodal tools, even when the study of literature is concerned. Although linear text and print-based reading are still favoured in the educational environment, multimodal pedagogy is needed to make literature relevant to media competent students in a highly digitized world. Since Interactive White Boards and Internet access have entered the classrooms, multimodality may no longer be an alternative, but a necessity in order to develop students' creativity or critical thinking and to encourage collaborative learning and social interaction. When the new media are used for teaching, digital devices can turn the linear text into hypertext or take classroom interaction to a new level by creating a collaborative space in the social media. The aim of my paper is to explore issues such as multimodal pedagogy, intermediality, digital storytelling, Internet reading and the way in which they redefine what is traditionally called text and canonical literature in education.*

Keywords: *multimodal pedagogy, digital literacy, hypertext.*

Introduction

Since the Romanian Ministry of National Education decided to introduce digital textbooks for the first and the second grade in Romanian schools starting with 15th September 2014, many issues have been brought into discussion, among which the issue of technology in education and all the aspects that follow it, such as the availability of technology in schools or the requirements of a new methodology for elaborating and using such textbooks. This is not the first step to encourage the use of technology in Romanian education, as Interactive Whiteboards, multimedia labs and eLearning platforms have been used for a few years. It is clear that education will soon be dominated by technology, therefore even more complex causes and effects of digital learning will have to be taken into consideration: the question of integrating digital media in instruction, *the digital divide*, multiple literacies, connected learning, digital rhetoric and *participatory culture* as defined by Henry Jenkins.

My presentation will clarify some of these concepts, in the light of the latest attempts to integrate multimodal teaching in Romania and will provide an analysis of the effects they might have on the study of canonical literary texts, in the shift from print-based literacy to multiple literacies and hypertexts.

Theoretical approaches

Even today the system of education still relies almost exclusively on print-based learning, there are enough signs to show that things are changing. In 2003, Gunther Kress was already drawing attention to the fact that: "We have moved from telling the world to showing the world"(Kress 2003: 15).

* University of Bucharest, irinailiescu@yahoo.com

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

Some recent concepts have described digitally mediated, multimodal communication which is dynamic and interactive. Acknowledging the power of computer mediated communication and the needs of the new generation of digital natives can be a solution to the problem of connected learning which tries to bridge the gap between formal education and what happens outside the classroom door, to reconcile the demands of the national curricula with students' computer addiction. I have started from the theoretical approaches of Theo Van Leeuwen, Henry Jenkins and Bryan Alexander. They describe features of ICT literacy and Web-based Instruction that will invariably affect traditional teaching. In Van Leeuwen's terms, Internet-based communication demands for new visual competencies, we face the need to move away from the old categories of language/image/music towards an integrated multimodal approach. The analysis of a web page proves that Internet reading is different, that it integrates writing and image in new ways which are" more visual than old page media, less pictorial than the old screen-media" (van Leeuwen 2008: 132).

This new type of reading and writing is directly connected to what Henry Jenkins calls *participatory culture* which takes place on key platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, where users have moved from the status of passive consumers to content creators, in the two dimensions of connectivity and interactivity. Jenkins describes the rise of interactive media and social networks or what is called Web 2.0, by showing that adolescents operate in online communities as a form of *collective intelligence.* (Jenkins, 2006) Web 2.0 is the new revolutionary online environment whose dynamics are based on social interaction so it can be used in education due to its opportunities for collaborative learning. Blogs and Facebook pages can also be used to popularize reading and literature among teenagers. Therefore, these multimodal tools should be turned into allies of education, not rejected as alien to serious instruction. A closer analysis can reveal that multimodal tools meet all the requirements of constructivist pedagogy, that collaborative computer work is student-centered, it allows students to be creators, it encourages learning through social relationships, it involves multiple points of view and a user-centered, participatory response. Computer technology can support all the principles of constructivist pedagogy, students are not treated as passive learners, digital environments can give them the opportunity to create meaning in interactive problem-solving tasks. Technology can connect formal education with the students' experiences outside the classroom, most of which are computer based. In McPherson's words, what she calls the *computing humanist* or *the multimodal scholar* explores new forms of literacy, so the digital must be repurposed for scholarly gain, due to its flexible, interactive nature.(McPherson, 2010) Readers/ users can collaborate or interact online, they can write back into the text, they can give or follow links. The main consequence is that texts are turned into fragments or hypertext, they change shape, reading is redefined, linear writing is no longer privileged as the only source of information. Kress makes a distinction between print-based reading which involves linear processing or looking for the main point and digital texts, where readers or students must select links to obtain information. (Kress qtd. in Beach, O'Brien, 2007: 42). Digital information is not perceived in a linear way, reading online data involves students' ability to use search engines, make choices and select from several links on a page, while being aware that Web pages work differently when compared to print materials.

In his social-semiotic approach of contemporary communication, Kress establishes several features of the contemporary media landscape, following the assertion that " The means for making meanings and the means for communicating

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

these meanings are shaped, first and foremost, by social and economic factors" (Kress 2010: 19). In his view, some of the elements that define current media are the affordances of participation of new technologies, focus on user-created content, the capacity of the media to obliterate differences between the local and the global, connectivity, mobility and multimodality which he describes as "representations in many modes, each chosen from rhetorical aspects for its communicational potentials" (Kress 2010: 22). All these factors are reflected by the educational environment, whether we like it or not, as students are consumers of media content. It is by integrating new media in instruction that students can be turned from heavy consumers of online content into active participants in an online learning process, where they can put their media literacy skills to better use in virtual classrooms or projects and benefit from multimodality and digital rhetoric for educational gains. This might have a strong impact on the study of literature, canonical texts may become hypertext, while the classroom discussion of a literary text might take the form of collaborative work in the social networks. This approach runs the risk of giving an incomplete, incoherent, even confusing perspective on a certain author or literary work, but teacher guidance and control could avoid such inconsistencies and make sure that the online classroom gets all the benefits of students' active engagement in understanding the text.

A number of practical examples that demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between media studies and literature studies has been provided by Neil Andersen. He suggests eleven teaching strategies which use concepts from media studies to support literature study and prove that the two are similar. The first strategy encourages the use of *biography as representation*, borrowing concepts from media studies and considering online resources like official sites and fan sites, blogs or wiki pages. "In considering the biases of biographer, audience and medium, students can explore and appreciate the differences between print and electronic, official and unofficial biographies" (Andersen, 2010: 105). Among Andersen's recommendations, other media connected strategies to teach literature involve fan fiction writing, analyzing movie trailers, creating a Facebook page as a character or a book study and even translating a message from one medium to another, from page to screen, by video adapting a text or creating a storyboard of a literary scene. This semiotic shift can be done if students "understand and use the codes and conventions of each medium as they translate" (Andersen, 2010: 109). These methods can give students a simultaneous understanding of literature and the media, while offering them the chance to work with both media and literary texts and understand the negotiations that take place between the two in the process of translation or adaptation.

Digital storytelling

If Internet reading and social media are integrated into education, the study of canonical literature may become directly linked with digital storytelling and digital rhetoric, which may soon displace printed communication in the classroom. Most students have already become digital writers who work across media and can select text, image and sound to make a message clear or to produce a digital text. This series of choices, with the purpose of getting a message across is what theoreticians call *digital rhetoric*. It can be applied to assess students, to critically engage them or to integrate them in an online community, it can be used as a teaching tool to make literature relevant for the new generations of digital natives. In 2004, a digital rhetoric course was organized at Michigan State University in an attempt to answer the questions regarding reading and writing practices in digital environments. The main findings of the course

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

give an outline of how digital rhetoric works against the new media background, in which the new technologies have converged. One of the conclusions is that "teaching must be rethought to better address the global interconnectivity and interactivity of digital writing practices and products" (DigiRhet.org,2006: 235). Digital rhetoric is defined by cultural and semiotic shifts which are triggered by the convergence of media, but it is also made possible through connection and interactivity, products of *digital writing* can be published, distributed and commented upon almost instantaneously. Texts are written on screens and combine multiple media elements, choices of digital elements affect the messages we produce. Texts change shape and are moved online, writing is computer mediated, it becomes digital. "Writing today means weaving text, images, sound and video- working within and across multiple media, often for delivery within and across digital space" (DigiRhet.org,2006: 240). The students involved in the course practically applied the principles of digital rhetoric and discovered that using digital writing for a course project or class assignment gives them the opportunity to engage in collaborative work and be part of a learning community, with a shared goal.

As Wolf points out, we should consider the role of *intermediality* in the study of literature, literary studies should include the study of media, they should extend the reading of a novel by having students select a scene and create a video or a multimedia presentation, a class book blog or a web page. This is what can lead to the use of digital stories in class, which can become a user-centered, interactive experience of literature and shared knowledge. Definitions of multimedia narratives are simple, but their relationship with literature is quite complex as they enable students to understand the meaning of a text while reshaping it. Stories can be told using digital devices, fiction becomes interactive, but also non-fiction can be told digitally, such as biographies or life experiences of ordinary people. Digital storytelling is "telling stories with digital technologies. Digital stories are narratives built from the stuff of cyberculture" (Alexander,2011: 3). Henry Jenkins introduced the concept of *transmedia storytelling* as a feature of contemporary media and entertainment in 2003. In his view, transmedia storytelling "is a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins 2010: 944). This has been taken even further by the development of social media and user generated content on the Web, which brings us to the creation of digital stories. Bryan Alexander gives a few examples of what digital stories may be: a short story made out of archival photographs, a video, a podcast or a blog novel. Given the wide range of options in the toolbox, they offer the possibility for immense creativity and innovation when students are asked to create a digital story as course assignment. Even if this is still unexplored territory in education, not sufficiently popularized because of technical limitations, digital storytelling can be an efficient teaching tool, not only for literature, but for any field of instruction. Their multiple opportunities are enhanced by the collaborative and social dimensions which are added by Web 2.0 environments or social media, what Alexander calls *social architecture*. Social networks "allow multiple channels of communication between site visitors, site creators and other parties" while multiple users can work together to build objects or collections (Alexander,2011: 31). He also discusses the concept of *combinatorial storytelling*, which reveals the collaborative process through which a canonical text can become *a networked book*, in which user contributions add a social layer to the original story. "Joseph Esposito recommends that we think of a networked book as a platform, whereupon visitors build materials in a collaborative space"

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

(Alexander,2011: 127). One of the spectacular examples that Alexander chooses to illustrate this concept is *Hamlet* on Facebook.

Some literary texts and canonical writers provide a natural environment for working with digital media, they have much more things in common than we expect with the multimedia environment. It seems Shakespeare is a natural medium for digital tools. In an article describing two projects in which students had to integrate Shakespeare's drama with movies and songs to create original content, Shamburg and Craighead quote Thomas Pettitt who explains that what today's students and Shakespeare have in common is "Sampling &remixing; borrowing&reshaping; appropriating&recontextualizing" (Pettitt qtd. in Shamburg, Craighead,2009: 74). According to the two authors, Shakespeare and today's students have a similar relationship with a print-based culture: "Approaches to creativity before and after a print-dominated culture are strikingly similar because there is a more collaborative view of creative productions and a more fluid use of the materials of others" (*ibidem)*. Students in Washington DC and Abingdon, Virginia developed two digital productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, which illustrate the concepts of participatory culture and remix. In the *Romeo and Juliet* project, students had to mix their own performance of the play with movie trailers and contemporary songs, thus moving from the status of cultural consumers to that of content creators, through the use of digital tools. The success of the two projects proves that students can understand the literary text by appropriating it with the digital instruments that are familiar to them, by integrating it into their lives and experience it through performance and remix.

Multimedia narrative and digital stories can be used in education either as a tool for presenting information or for assessing students and helping them understand different subjects.

"That sense of storytelling as a tool for presenting information points us to a related meaning: storytelling as a tool for understanding complex subjects. The process of creating a digital story can help us make sense of a cognitive domain." (Alexander,2011: 215) In project-based learning, digital storytelling engages the students and encourages collaborative learning, developing *students' voices*, as Alexander observes when he quotes the opinions of teachers who had classroom projects based on digital storytelling. (Alexander,2011: 217)

Fan fiction

A spectacular example of a multimodal tool which turns analog text and canonical literature into hypertext is fan fiction. It has created online communities of users who manipulate canonical texts and become content creators themselves by writing different endings or new chapters, transgressing the borders between media or between fiction and reality by sharing their texts with other fans, posting comments in forums and storing their texts in online libraries. Most canonical writers have fan fiction web pages, sharing the online space with Harry Potter fans, among others, but I have chosen Jane Austen's example, as 2013 celebrates the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*. Sites such as The Republic of Pemberley (www.pemberley.com), The Pemberley Library or the Meryton Assembly are home to Jane Austen fan fiction and function as collaborative storytelling platforms which have been working as guides for teachers who assigned teams of students to create a transmedia adaptation of a story. An interesting example of how fan fiction and digital storytelling can be used as educational tools is given by Nick De Martino, a senior media strategist, journalist and educator, Head of Business Development for

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

Theatrics.com, a video storytelling platform. In an interview posted on his blog, DeMartino provides specific curricular examples of what could be done with Theatrics: a literature teacher could assign a team to create a transmedia adaptation of a story and involve an entire class using the platform. He describes the experiment of *Welcome to Sanditon*, based on *Sanditon*, the unfinished novel by Jane Austen, in which fans of the central text are creating new characters and videos. In DeMartino's view, such narrative interventions help students engage in the storyworld and become co-creators, thus *learning how to learn*. (www.nickdemartino.net/blog). The educator can set the goals and manage the videos, while participants can vote, comment and interact. Students can create a character and a video as a response to the story, while interacting with other participants.

This experiment raises a lot of questions related to the way in which fan fiction or video storytelling platforms can be used in education, for making students understand and love canonical literary texts. Can it be done only if students have very good knowledge of the author's works, style and characters? Can any secondary school student be involved in such a project or does it take real fans of a particular writer to create new content? Can such tools be used with non-English speaking students who might find it more difficult to create fan fiction content in English? One cannot provide certain answers to such questions and only the future can tell how efficient these multimedia tools can be and whether they will be accepted and applied in schools. In my view, they can manage to develop student interest, critical thinking and active engagement in learning, only against a background of solid information on the author and his or her original work, provided under the teacher's guidance, to avoid incoherence and confusion. As for non-English speaking students, writing fan fiction can be a good opportunity to practise English and interact with English native speakers.

Although fan fiction may seem to destroy the integrity of a canonical text, it can be an efficient teaching tool, as it involves good knowledge of characters, plot and even style of writing, it helps the readers not only immerse in the world of the book, but also become creators themselves, as another instance of the democratization of the media in which authorsip is just a matter of choice.

Conclusions

Media tools redefine the way we teach reading and writing, they can develop students' critical thinking and active engagement skills in the area they like best, the online environment. There is still much uncertainty about the future of new media in education, both scholars and teachers are still to answer many questions, some of them are even concerned about being much less media literate than their students. In most schools around the world, print-based literacy is still the norm, but students rely on multimodal communication outside the classroom, which is the reason why future education should consider integrating multimodal teaching in the study of literature as the only way to make it relevant and attractive for the digital natives.

References

Alexander, Bryan, *The New Digital Storytelling*, Praeger, 2011.
Andersen, Neil, *Media literacy's gifts to literature study*, English Teaching:Practice and Critique, May 2010, 9.1, p. 103-113.
Beach, Richard, O'Brien, David- *Infusing Multimodal Tools and Digital Literacies into an English Education Program*, English Education, 40.1, October 2007, p.41-60
DigiRhet.org, Duke University Press, *Teaching Digital Rhetoric: Community, Critical Engagement and Application*, Pedagogy, 6.2, Spring 2006, p.231-259

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)

Jenkins, Henry- *Convergence Culture*, New York University Press, 2006
Jenkins, Henry- *Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment:An Annotated Syllabus, Continuum, Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, 24.60, December 2010*,p.943-958.
Kress, Gunther, *Literacy in the New Media Age*, Routledge 2003
Kress, Gunther, *Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010.
Leeuwen, van Theo, *New forms of writing, new visual competencies*, Visual Studies, 23.2, September 2008.
McPherson, Tara, *Digital Scholarship and Pedagogy*, Media Studies and the Digital Humanities, Cinema Journal, 48, 2, Winter 2009, p.119-123.
Shamburg, Christopher, Craighead, Cari, *Shakespeare, Our Digital Native*, English Journal 99.1, 2009, p. 74-78.
Wolf, Werner, *Intermediality and the Study of Literature*, Comparative Literature and Culture,13.3, September 2011.

Electronic resources

http://austenauthors.net/pride-and-prejudice-bookshelf/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=pride-and-prejudice-bookshelf, consulted on 10th June 2013
http://www.nickdemartino.net/blog/2013/5/16/jane-austen-edtech-and-the-promise-of-theatrics.html, consulted on 10th June 2013
http://meryton.com/, consulted on 12th June 2013
http://www.pemberley.com/ , consulted on 10th June 2013
http://www.theatrics.com/, consulted on 12th June 2013

BDD-A6026 © 2013 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:05 UTC)